

## WILD ROSES AND URBAN BORING BEES: (WESTERN) FEMINIST READINGS OF A THAI FEMININE TEXT?

Many a night she heard the fisherman talking to each other and telling about a how kind and good the prince was; and she was so glad that she had saved his life when she had found him, half dead, drifting on the waves. She remembered how his head had rested on her chest and with what passion she had kissed him. But he knew nothing about his rescue; he could not even dream about her.

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, 1836<sup>1</sup>

She declared that she would rather go with the beautiful stranger into the wild forest itself, than return to the cottage, where no one did as she wished, and from which the beautiful knight would himself depart sooner or later.

Friedrich de la Motte Fouque, *Undine*, 1811<sup>2</sup>

"Thailand" applies only to Bangkok.

The countryside belongs to the forgotten Siam

Which simply does not count any more,

So steeped are the city people in their filthy pursuits.

Angkarn Kalayanaphong, *Lamnam phu Kradeung*. 1969<sup>3</sup>

In 1966 Thidaa Bunnaak, a woman who had previously earned notoriety for her creation of sexually provocative and explicit novels and short stories, penned somewhat chastened tale – 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter

<sup>1</sup> See Hans Andersen, *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories* (translated by Erik Haugaard). London: Gollancz Children's Paperbacks, 1994, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> See Friedrich de la Motte Fouque, *Undine*. Sawtry: Dedalus European Classics, 1990, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> See Angkarn Kalayanaphong, *Lamnam phu Kradeung* ('The Song of Phu Kradeung'), Bangkok: Seukait Sayam, 1973 (second edition), p. 43. The excerpt is translated into English and quoted in Chetana Nagavajara, 'The Sense of the Past in the Poetry of Angkarn Kalayanaphong' in Chetana Nagavajara, *Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective. Collected Articles 1978-1992*, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996, p. 210.

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Bee'. Though in some ways apparently more conservative in outlook than her earlier works, Thidaa's 'Forest Rose' breaks with conventional depictions of Thai female sexuality in one significant way, in that it opens up the possibility of female sexual desire for and of itself. In its investigation of this notion of desire, this paper represents a continuation of previous analyses (see Harrison 1999, 2000a and 2002), which draw attention to the need and context for a study of Thai women authors such as Thidaa Bunnaak, and which propose the lens of gender, feminism and sexuality as a valuable one in furthering the understanding and interpretation of Southeast Asian literature. Implicit in this analytical perspective is an acknowledgment of the fact that the subsequent reading of what proves, in the Thai context, to be an essentially feminine or romantic text, is informed by (Western) feminist concerns. Part of this paper's project is therefore to examine the extent to which a particular Western theoretical framework can open up new meanings in a non-Western literary work. For these purposes it also includes a complete translation of 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee'.

A detailed analysis of Thidaa's career as a writer of sexually explicit fiction and examples of her *oeuvre* from a twenty-year period dating from the close of the 1940s, is provided in Harrison 2002. During this time span Thidaa produced some ten novels and short story collections, though only three remain currently available, namely *Roi phiisawaat* ('A Hundred Loves', 1950), *Mum meut khong dikan* ('The Darker Parts of my Life', 1964) and *Baap thii saam* ('The Third Deadly Sin', 1966).<sup>4</sup> Some reasons for the fleeting nature of Thidaa's popularity are also investigated in Harrison 2002, in which the contrast in the reception of sexually explicit fiction by male and female authors is highlighted. As the contemporary writer Sidaoreuang herself notes in her own study of Thidaa's work:

It is strange that fifty years ago there was a Thai woman writer who dared to write in this kind of way. For if a man had written such a work, only a small number of people would have objected, but here we have a woman writer who, were she writing nowadays, would certainly be labelled an 'erotic' writer (Sidaoreuang 1999: 152).

According to her biographer, one of Thidaa's earliest works, entitled *Kham saraphaap rak khong ying saao* ('Confessions from a Young Woman's Love Life'), was considered so pornographic in content that it was deemed an offence to public morality and led to a court case against its author (see Jetsadaa 1950: 293). A picture emerges from the early stages of Thidaa's writing career, of a woman who chose to produce sexually provocative fiction both as a challenge to patriarchal cultural norms and in response to her own personal disappointments in love. In her rejection of romanticism as an ideal conducive to women's emotional well being, Thidaa replaces the importance of love with the significance of power, and the agency, choice and independence that it brings. Thidaa's heroines are frequently presented as promiscuous *femmes fatales* with unorthodox sexual mores, terminally disingenuous 'bad girls' who refuse to be losers in the sexual power game. Through such depictions, her works can be argued to share the quasi-didactic tones that characterize so much of Thai literary output, her social consciousness provided by the brutal exposure of sexual hypocrisy which Thidaa clearly felt to typify Bangkok society of her day.

Though the later stages of Thidaa's career are barely documented (and it has to date proved impossible to ascertain what became of this once popular erotic writer), it becomes apparent from a study of her short stories in *Baap thii saam* ('The Third Deadly Sin', 1966) that a noted contrast exists between her earlier works and this later collection. The title suggests as much, in its reference (though partially ironic) to the third Buddhist precept – a prohibition on sexual misconduct (*haam praphreut phit nai kaam*). In complete contrast to the raunchy and scandalous tales of women like Ritchong, the streetwise (*choke chone*) call-girl heroine of Thidaa's 1964 novella *Phan chuu* ('A Thousand Lovers'), short stories such as 'Tears From the Heart' (*Namtaa juak huajai*) and 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee' (*Kulaap paa kap malaeng phu meuang*) reveal a return to certain more traditional values of romanticism and feminine innocence and a corresponding retreat of the valiant and abrasive struggle for female power through sexual expression that typifies Thidaa's previous texts (and is more fully discussed in Harrison 2002). This modification can be argued to derive from two possible influences in Thidaa's later life: the establishment of a more stable loving relationship through marriage to a French musician (Orathai forthcoming); and her employment as an "agony aunt" at one of Thailand's best selling newspapers *The Daily News*, which earned her a more established and respectable place in mainstream society than she had as an author of sexually explicit fiction.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> As a result, Thidaa is better remembered as an "agony aunt" than as a writer.

<sup>5</sup> Even these three publications are not widely available and certainly not currently in print or for sale in Thai bookshops. Research into these novels and short stories was made possible by the generous support of Thai book-collector and literary historian Suchat Sawatsi, through the loan of copies from his private collection.



Of greater significance in the contrasting approach that Thidaa takes to the depiction of her later heroines and their worldview, is that although the *Itaap thii saam* collection is far less sexually provocative in any overt sense, short stories such as 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee' in fact combine traditional and "morally acceptable" notions of femininity with a repackaging of female sexuality that astonishingly foregrounds, for the first time in Thidaa's work – and in Thai women's fiction in general – the possibility of female sexual desire in and of itself. Whether Thidaa's later work therefore represents a move towards the creation of "feminist"/female role models as opposed to simply meeting the needs of male fantasy is one of the questions this paper seeks to investigate through its focus on female desire in the text.

Female desire is a central issue at stake in erotic texts authored by the few Thai women that dare to produce them, more often due to its lack or absence than to its dominance as a theme.<sup>6</sup> For while the creation of sexually explicit works clearly constitutes a transgressive challenge to conventional norms for "good" Thai female behaviour, these authors are often constrained by deeply ingrained prescriptions for female sexual sexuality – prescriptions which foreclose the possibility of inventing female characters that experience, reveal or even acknowledge the existence of female desire in its own right. Consequently, the heroines of these works tend to be driven far less by their own sexual desires and appetites as such, than by their need to instigate desire in men, so to attain power over them – or at the very least to level the playing field in the sexual power game. Thidaa's heroines are, more often than not, focused on engaging sexual desire in men, either through beauty or through sexually flamboyant behaviour, or both.

This is not to suggest, however, that desire cannot be associated with power, through the processes of its acquisition. Nor is it to deny that power lies at the heart of the sexual encounter. As Western feminist critic Amber Hollibaugh chooses to lay emphasis, "No matter how sex is played out or with what gender, power is the heart, not just the beast, of all sexual enquiry" (1996: 228). Hollibaugh is, however, obliged to clarify her belief that "power in sex can be a form of pleasure", with a reminder of the contemporary Western

cultural context i.e. that "current feminist affairs have demanded that we live outside power in sex. We seem to have decided that power in sex is male, because it leads to dominance and submission, which are in turn defined as exclusively masculine" (ibid.: 228). Concomitant to this is the sense in Western erotic tradition that although power can in itself be a site of eroticisation, the link has usually been made between the erotic and the subordination of women (Jackson 1996: 176), rather than their empowerment.<sup>7</sup> An important point of contrast with the West is again therefore raised through the study of erotic writing in Thailand: for while Thidaa's stories may in part be inspired by an appeal to male fantasy; they simultaneously serve the somewhat incongruous purpose of offering quasi-feminist role models to women readers.

Clearly women's desire for power is inscribed in Thidaa's sexually provocative texts, texts that frequently deal with women's seduction of men (and which are more fully discussed and analysed in Harrison 2002). What this paper seeks to interrogate, however, is what becomes of female sexual desire in such texts. The main thrust of this enquiry is informed by (largely Western) feminist concerns, in which women's explorations of their own sensuality hold a significant place in the move to liberate them from patriarchal discourses of female sexuality. Western feminist theory has recognized the need to counteract the strong cultural messages instilled in women from childhood that female sexuality, female sexual desire and female erotic demand are dangerous, dirty, poisonous, frightening and intimidating – and that they should therefore remain unexplored (see, for example, Hollibaugh 1989, Lorde 2000 and Young-Eisendrath 2001). Moreover, it has sought to demonstrate that when women's desire is alluded to it is nearly always constructed as an adjunct, consequence or reflection of male desire. As Polly Young-Eisendrath (2001: 82) aptly puts it, "The dilemma of female sexual desire is that the light of truth turned on our desires will reveal that we live in a world of male sexual imagination." These observations follow on from the work of feminist critics such as Laura Mulvey in her explorations of the representation of the female body as site of male desire in cinema, and the circulation of images of women for male pleasure (see, for example, Mulvey 1975). For Mulvey, female desire is an emotional dilemma under patriarchy, one that has been ignored as insignificant (1984:29). Her arguments are supported by Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell and Carol Wolkowitz in their explanation that locating the

<sup>6</sup> Thidaa appears to be among the first Thai women to have written sexually explicit material. Following the commercial success in the second half of the 1990s of the erotic female writer Sujinda Khantayaaalongkot (for further details of whom see Harrison 2000a) and perhaps also due to changes in perceptions of female sexuality and its place in public discourse, the number of women writers to deal openly with this topic has recently increased to include such authors as Arayaa Raatjamroensuk, Sumittra Jan-ngao, Rawiwaan and Prathanana Rathana.

<sup>7</sup> Nowhere better is this illustrated than in French author Pauline Reage's 'The Story of O', published in 1954 and telling the tale of its sexually masochistic heroine.

specificity of women's desire exercises (Western) feminists working from a variety of perspectives, all of whom come to ask themselves the pertinent question: "is autonomous female desire possible in a patriarchal, indeed, phallogocentric culture?" (2000: 55-6).

Although these ideas are symptomatic of Western patriarchal thought, a case can be made for their also having a currency in the Thai cultural context, similar fears of female sexuality abound, leading to similar controls and constraints. As Truong (1990: 156) contends in her study of prostitution, "Throughout history, religious, legal and social practices in Thailand have accorded men the right to control and use female sexuality for their own ends." While both Buddhist and animist belief systems point to the harmful and polluting effects of female sexuality on men's physical health, general well-being and spiritual potency (for further details of which see, for example, Harrison 2000a, Mills 1995 and Khin 1990), traditional literature reinforces these fears in its invention – and subsequent punishment – of female characters who represent a sexual threat to men. Such protagonists include the notorious, sexually duplicitous threesome, Kaakii, Moraa and Wanthorn, (commonly referred to as *Wanthorn song jai*, literally 'doubled-hearted' Wanthorn), the former two being characters from *jataka* tales, the latter the heroine the early nineteenth-century epic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*.<sup>8</sup> As a columnist for the popular Thai women's magazine *Kunlasatrii* ('The Lady') comments on the place of these three literary heroines;

"Most ladies in literature are exemplary of nice, ladylike behaviour and are graced with good manners and conduct, especially in their loyalty to their husbands, whom they value more highly than their own lives, an example of behaviour which every man requires of a woman. There are only a very small number of ladies who have become symbols of women whom society views as bad, and these are Wanthorn, Moraa and Kaakii' (1983:81).

Other fearsome literary ladies appear in the form of marauding beauties, such as Naang Laweng Wanlaa in Sunthorn Phu's famous mid-nineteenth-century epic poem *Phra Aphaimani*; or as sexually ravenous sea ogresses, such as the character of Phii seu samut from the same work.

<sup>8</sup> The character of Moraa appears in the Thai classical work *Jantakhorop*, which is commonly believed to be based on a *jataka* tale. For further details of the stories of Kaakii and of Wanthorn see Harrison 2000b.

<sup>9</sup> For full details of the reception of Suchindaa's fiction see Harrison 2000a. For a discussion of the debates surrounding Or Udakorn's 'Dark Instinct' – a tale of the evils of human nature epitomized by sexual desire and expressed through the character of the wife of an impotent man who copulates with an Alsatian to release her sexual tension – see Or Udakorn 2000: 126-130. This story has not, to my knowledge, been translated into English.

<sup>10</sup> As Kepner points out in her subsequent analysis of the text (ibid.:199-204), the award prompted the publication of an entire volume of essays criticizing the short story collection in which *Mor thii khuut mai ork* appeared, for which see Naren 1990.

The impact of Thai religious belief, folklore, legend and literature has been to bolster the widely held cultural proscription of female sexual desire, particularly, though not solely, when it is manifested outside the confines of marriage. Yet even within marriage, Thai women appear to have been socialized into thinking of sexual activity, as Penny Van Esterik (2000: 193) formulates it, as "stains upon the soul". Other commentators have similarly concluded that female sexual practice is typically considered as necessary for procreation rather than pleasure, and that women are considered to have less intense sexual urges than men and are better able to be in control of them (Knodel et al 1999: 96). It is for such reasons that modern Thai literary works such as Or Udakorn's notorious short story 'Dark Instinct' (*Sanchatayaan meut*), first published in 1950, the 1997 short story 'Feminine' (*Feminiin*) by Rawiwaan and almost the entire *oeuvre* of the prolific novelist and short story writer Suchindaa Khantayaalongkot, continue to provoke intense controversy in their references to the possibility of female sexual desire.<sup>9</sup> Nowhere better is this exemplified than by the furore that erupted over the award of the SEAWrite prize in 1990 to woman writer Anchan for a short story collection that included the following passage from her *Mor thii khuut mai ork* ('The Pot that Scouring will not Save'):<sup>10</sup>

He pushed her backward onto the bed, fell over her, penetrated her at once. She wrapped her arms around him tightly, strained against him, greedy to absorb the delicious pleasure with her whole body. Breathless with excitement and the joy of his desire for her, she was barely aware of the whispering in her ear.

"Little Nien had better be sure there's nothing on the stove, or she'll have to get down there and turn it off, little bare-tits Nien, bare-ass naked just like she is now – and who knows who might get a good look at her through the window, little Nien hustling her skinny bare ass around the kitchen ..."



Whispering, whispering as he always did, words to arouse not her passion but her humiliation, which, reflected in her face, heightened his lust and pleasure, as she well knew. But today, when he lifted his head to look down into her face, what he saw was not embarrassment but desire. Headless of his words, she moved against him in a frenzy, clutched him fiercely, then stiffened, held him fast, shuddered.

His face was suffused with confusion and disbelief, and then with outrage, because he had gone too far and now could not hold back. And also because she had cheated him, had grabbed her pleasure from him, and now he could not withhold himself, get out of her, take it away. He was powerless; he could do nothing except to move faster and faster, get it over with as soon as possible" (Anchan in Kepner 1996: 191-2).<sup>11</sup>

As Anchan herself explains (in Kepner 1996: 203), the term *mor* or 'pot' in the story's title doubles up as a common Thai reference to the female sex, whereby the burning pot becomes a symbol of the heroine's burning, yet hopeless sexuality.

In *Mor thii khuat mai ork* Anchan defies Thai cultural niceties, not simply by her introduction of female sexuality into the public domain, but in addition through her treatment of sex in its relationship to gendered power and through her courageous acknowledgement of female desire in its own right.

Although written over twenty years earlier, Thidaa Bunnak's 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee', can in some senses be argued to prefigure the themes raised more overtly in the work of Anchan. Like Nien, Thidaa's heroine Jan-por is essentially a 'good' woman, diligent, obedient and dutiful and therefore incongruously sexually charged.

What makes the story of the innocent, late-teenage Jan-por such an unconventional one is not only the fact that the heroine becomes sexually aware during the course of the tale, but the processes through which this awareness takes hold. Jan-por's first experiences of desire are precipitated by her discovery of a hunter lost in the forest, and delirious with fever. He is described to be dazed like a wild animal, eyes closed, as if near to death, a significant starting point for the "exchange" between these two characters. For it is Jan-por who, unconventionally for a woman, initiates the desirous encounter, through her active and unreciprocated perusal of the hunter as handsome/desirable – his

good looks make her heart flutter. It is Jan-por therefore who possesses the power of the gaze, which the man is physically unable to return. The significance of this power shift lies in the fact that it breaks with the trends of Thidaa's earlier works, in which women exhibit sexual desire merely as an end to a "higher" means. More importantly, it indicates that Jan-por's sense of desire comes as a response to the man himself – and not to his desire for her.

Jan-por's nascent sexual interest is further aroused on her part by an act which starts out as an innocent one of nurture. For in realizing that there is nothing at hand to pound up the wild herbs needed to treat the man, Jan-por chews them up in her mouth, places her (notably pure and soft) lips over his, and so passes the medication into his mouth in what becomes a (notably unknowing and innocent) kiss. Unaware of exactly what she has just done – as if in a reiteration of the fact that women are barely cognisant of their own sexual desires – Jan-por's act of nurture gives way to the first pangs of sensual pleasure.

Although occasional unconventional elements are to be noted in the remainder of the story, Thidaa adopts a more conservative message with regard to sexuality from this point in the narrative, as if unable to retain the autonomy of Jan-por's sexual desire. On one hand she appears in some haste to convert Jan-por's desire into the more conventional, and socially acceptable, emotion of love, which is in turn expressed through an impassioned dedication to curing and caring for the ailing hunter. In this regard Jan-por's love for the hunter takes on distinct elements of self-sacrifice. Her realization, following the kiss, that this man means "more to her than her very own heart" precisely echoes the conservative sentiments of the ladies magazine *Kunlasariri* in its statement that the exemplary heroines of literature value their husbands more than their own lives.

In a similarly conservative vein, Thidaa also seems reluctant to persist with the concept of the empowered female gaze, again falling back on the women's desire to be desired, so preserving the fundamental purity of the story's heroine. As soon as the hunter is revived, it is he who immediately assumes the power of the gaze on Jan-por: "When the man re-awoke and was able to speak more coherently, she could not say why it was that she liked his eyes so much, most especially when they gazed down at her face and then moved still further down to peruse almost her entire body." Significantly, Jan-por is drawn to the hunter's eyes, as his view of her becomes the focus of her own pleasure.

The hunter is drawn to Jan-por because of her exceptional beauty, a beauty that, even more attractively, she only becomes aware of through his recognition of it. In depicting her heroine as an extremely beautiful young woman, Thidaa again falls back on convention in her creation of a female character whose ultimate charm is to provoke male desire – and safely so because of her ultimate innocence. For Jan-por is not only the pinnacle of female aesthetic perfection,

<sup>11</sup> For a full translation into English of Anchan's *Mor thii khuat mai ork* see Kepner 1996:172-199.

but is also virginal, as the reference to forest flower in the story's title suggests. The wild rose is symbolic here of the unsullied woman, vulnerable to loss of purity from the male/carpenter bee – a penetrative/pollinating insect that sucks its fill of sweet nectar before promiscuously moving on.<sup>12</sup> Here Thidaa's allusion to the long-standing Thai metaphor, that dates from the earliest examples of classical literature, again serves to signal a certain respect for traditional gender roles on the author's part. At the same time it also indicates a further issue at stake in the text's discussion of sexual relations – that of the threat to women posed by male desire outside the "correct" context of marriage and family. As Jan-pho is repeatedly warned by her father, contact with the man from the town can only result in emotional pain, a message reiterated by the lost hunter himself as he virtuously desists from seducing and then leaving her (and consequently acknowledges himself as "truly foolish" in the closing sentence of the tale, for forgoing the pleasure on offer.)

Thidaa's presentation of male sexual threat to female innocence in the form of the boring bee runs contrary to the content of much of her earlier works, yet can perhaps be seen to echo something of her own personal experience with Bangkok men as a young woman fresh from the provinces that in fact may have driven her to write sexually explicit fiction (see Jetsadaa 1950 and Harrison 2002). The autobiographical resonance is played out in 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee' via the association it draws between female sexuality and the natural environment of the unsullied forest on the one hand, and male desire paralleled with the corrupting influences of the urban world on the other. Here Thidaa again taps into elements of literary convention associated with the veneration of nature that takes hold in *nirat* court poetry (for further details of which see Suchitra in this volume, and Harrison 2000a) and which still resonates in contemporary Thai fiction. Alongside the reverence for the natural environment as a site of cultural and moral purity comes the contrasting perception of the city as the breeding ground for moral, spiritual and sexual depravity. It is a perception expressed in numerous examples of modern Thai literary works, among them those by the poet Angkarn Kalyanaphong and by short story writers such as Korn Krailart.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For further details of the history and use of this metaphor in both traditional and modern Thai literature see Harrison 2000a.

<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, Angkarn's *Lammam phu Kradeung* and the related discussion of his views of city life in Chetana 1996: 199–228. For a translation of Korn Krailart's short story 'In the Mirror' see Anderson and Mendiones 1985.

For the different reasons outlined above, it therefore appears that although Thidaa Bunnaak opens 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee' with a suggestion of the possibilities of female desire, she is unable and/or unwilling to sustain its existence as the story proceeds. All this despite the fact that the actions of her heroine, Jan-pho, are throughout the narrative essentially driven by desire (soon to become alias "love"). So strong is this motivation that it exceeds Jan-pho's sense of obligation to her father as a dutiful daughter, and when he is less than enthusiastic in tending to the ailing hunter, she starts for the first time to become awkward and sullen, even disobedient and deceitful. But Jan-pho's disobedience is in effect minimal in its impact, since the fate of her relationship with the hunter lies not in her own hands but in those of the male characters of the story and the understanding that they reach with each other, an understanding so strongly grounded in the workings of patriarchy that it does not even need to be spoken out loud. The hunter knows that his seduction of the forest-dweller's daughter will constitute an act of aggression against the father and that he will have become the cobra that swings round to bite the hand that saved it.<sup>14</sup>

The patriarchal framework of Thidaa's story might serve to define it better as a work of romantic rather than erotic fiction, a feminine rather than a feminist text. The fact that the patriarchal prohibition on female sexuality outside the confines of marriage, which resonates in this story through the hunter's inability to offer Jan-pho a "proper" relationship, clearly plays into some of the defining features of romance fiction, as Avis Lewallen (1989: 87) explains with reference to Western texts: "The heroine wants sex, but only within the marriage bed, and thus these romances illustrate women's lack of social and psychological freedom to express their sexuality. Sexuality must be anchored to an emotional attachment that will ensure, through marriage, material security."

If 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee' is capable of operating at the level of quasi erotic text for the male reader and as romance or feminine fiction for a female audience, it also appears to hold some association with a third literary genre, that of folkloric fairy story. The work is frequently coloured by a sense of the imaginary tale, not only in its latent eroticism and the romantic forest setting that dissociates its innocent heroine from the harsh realities of the outside world, but in addition through references in the text to the hunter's perception of Jan-pho as an illusory forest spirit and of the constant reminders

<sup>14</sup> From the point of view of this defining relationship between the two male characters, the story's absence of any mention of Jan-pho's mother also becomes clear.



to him of scenes from stories once read. There are distinct, likely coincidental, echoes here of a number of European fairy stories, among them Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', Friedrich de la Motte Fouque's related tale of 'Undine', and the forest episode of Walt Disney's animated *Sleeping Beauty*, released in 1959 and possibly known to Bangkok audiences by the time Thidaa penned 'The Forest Rose'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most interesting parallel is to be noted in connection with Andersen's 'Little Mermaid', the tale of an adolescent "girl" whose life underwater separates her from the human world and the dangers that is presents. When, at the age of fifteen, she is permitted to make her first journey to the surface of the sea, the little mermaid encounters a handsome prince whom she saves from drowning and whom, while he is still unconscious, she kisses passionately. As with Thidaa's Jan-por, Andersen's heroine thus falls in love with a stranger from another 'world', whereupon she is driven to save his life, even if this is at risk to her own. As in 'The Forest Rose', the story of 'The Little Mermaid' is also suggestive of nascent female sexuality, symbolized, in the view of Marina Warner (1995: 404), in the Andersen story by the division of her fishtail into two human legs, which subsequently bleed in pain like menses.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, as in the encounter between the 'forest rose' and the hunter from the town, that between the little mermaid and her prince is doomed to failure since the two hail from different worlds and reconciliation cannot be achieved.

The story of Undine, an adolescent water sprite capable of assuming human form and who, like Jan-por is a child of nature, further underlines the unreconcilable nature of different worlds.<sup>17</sup> But unlike Jan-por and the little mermaid, Undine is overtly frolicsome and unrestrained and never obedient to her (adopted) parents. When Huldbrand, a knight from the city, becomes lost in the forest and seeks refuge at the parents' cottage, Undine behaves seductively towards him in a wilful challenge to her father's authority that he

is incapable of countering. Here there is no unspoken pact between men, as Undine's foster-father pleads with Huldbrand: "Why, Sir Knight, I have received you as one honest-hearted man is wont to receive another, and now you are here caressing my foster-child in secret, and letting me run hither and thither through the night in anxious search of her" (Fouque 1990: 34). Undine is therefore successful in begging her father to allow Huldbrand to remain with them; and in any case, like in the 'Forest Rose', the lost stranger is unable to leave because the return journey to the city is so hazardous: "You cannot go away," replied Undine. "Just try it once, to cross that overflowed forest stream with a boat, with your horse, or alone, as you may fancy. Or rather don't try it, for you would be dashed to pieces by the stones and trunks of trees which are carried down by it with the speed of lightening" (ibid.: 49). Once again an opposition is set up in this story between the city and the forest, though in Fouque's 'Undine' the former no longer symbolizes a sexual threat to the purity of the latter. Quite the contrary, and in keeping with traditional Northern European folkloric representations of the forest, it becomes instead an eerily romanticized site of danger and darkness, haunted by spectres and spirits and suggestive of fantasy and eroticism.

Is the overriding message we are to take from each of these stories, including that of Thidaa, therefore that the worlds of nature and of the city cannot be reconciled, nor too the worlds of sexual innocence and sexual experience, of tender flowers and urban boring bees, of women and of men? Thidaa Bunnaak seems to suggest that this is the case. Despite this author's initial courageous forays into the possibility of female desire as an end to itself in this story, Thidaa soon adopts the conventions of romance fiction in her apparent conviction that female sexuality only has a place within the safe confines of a permanent and "honourable" relationship, i.e. marriage. Hence we are assured in the story's closing lines that, soon Jan-por "would forget when she met a young man from the forest who would dedicate his life and soul to her." We are further reminded that if that does not happen, Jan-por should, for her own sense of well being, remain a virgin, because, like the 'good' man he transpires to be, the city hunter "did not want her to become like any old flower by the wayside. At least she should be like a forest rose that blossoms and fades in the fullness of time."

## THE FOREST ROSE AND THE TOWN CARPENTER BEE

Jan-por could still remember the day they had met. She had been kneeling by the stream and leaning over the water's edge to gaze at her reflection. No one had ever told her before how beautiful she was – for the dense forest where

<sup>15</sup> According to Marina Warner (1990: 396), Andersen in fact composed the tale of 'The Little Mermaid' from various strands of oral and written tales in Eastern as well as Western tradition. Discussions of the likeness of 'The Forest Rose and the Town Carpenter Bee' to the tale of *Undine* arose from class discussions of this text and I am particularly grateful to Daido Hamono for noting similar resonances in the two works.

<sup>16</sup> In one of the source stories for 'The Little Mermaid', i.e. the French tale of *Melusine*, the sexuality of the heroine is further emphasised by casting her as an enchantress who lives in a magical elsewhere whence she beckons to her lovers to enter her paradise (Warner 1990: 396).

<sup>17</sup> 'Undine' was adapted into the play 'Undine' by the French playwright Jean Giraudoux. It is perhaps probable that Thidaa therefore knew of the work through her French musician husband.

she lived alone with her father lay far from the nearest village and far away from the eyes of other people. 'He' had been the one to tell her that she was even more beautiful than the moon, just as her name implied – for Jan was the name of the moon. And for Jan-por it was the moon that, struck by her amazing beauty, bowed down to her in adoration.

When she first laid eyes on him he was dazed like a wild animal that had been seriously wounded and was staggering so clumsily towards the water to take a drink that he almost failed to see her. His flesh and his clothes were in tatters, torn by thorns and so drenched in blood that she recoiled.

True enough, she had seen blood before when her father had been hunting animals for their skins and their meat, but then they were just animals, ones that her father had taught her how to get the best use from. Yet though he was a hunter and trader in forest products, he nevertheless abided by a golden rule not to hurt another animal tending its young. He felt sorry for them. "They have young that they must tend and love," he used to say. "Just like I do."

Jan-por had seen blood so often in her childhood that she was quite used to seeing it flow from animal wounds. But blood from a human body covered in wounds was something she had never encountered in her life before.

Jan-por rushed up to his motionless body, her arms wide apart, and she raised him up in her arms so that he was no longer lying face down with his hands moving fitfully in the water, as though he was about to drift away downstream. He had a handsome face and his hair was sleek, even though in places it was matted together with dirt. The sight made her heart flutter.

His body was stone cold to the touch, as though he were dead, but once he had drunk some water and been touched by her warmth, his eyes began to flicker gently and slowly to open. She could see they were still razor sharp, so sharp that Jan-por hardly dared look at them.

He moaned and thrashed to and fro, his hands repeatedly making as if to grab at something in the air, sometimes accidentally brushing her cheeks, shoulders and arms as he did so. His body, which had been stone cold, was now burning with heat and soon it felt as though he had been roasting himself by a fire.

Jan-por realized that he must have lost his way, that he was also suffering from malaria and that now the fever, which had abated, was rising again and was so acute that he was becoming delirious. Nothing that he said, as the words poured out from his mouth, made any sense to her at all. What was she to do? He was heavy and although life in the forest had ensured she was no weakling, the hut where she lived was a long way away and she did not have enough strength left to drag him back there.

But then she remembered how her father carried dead animals home after he shot them. If they were not too big he would tie them up by the legs with vines and then carry them on his shoulders. That was what she would do with

him – bind him by the arms and the legs. He was growing weaker and weaker all the time. She would have to run back home and call her father to bring a pole so they could carry him.

But she was afraid of how seriously feverish and delirious he was growing. By the time she had found the vines and creepers to tie him up with, her sweat was running down like drops of rain, despite the cool air. The orchids from the tall bough began to waft their refreshing fragrance through the air, reviving her a little and giving her the energy she needed to go in search of the medicinal roots and herbs that she knew she might use to tend to him.

Having found the herbs, she realized she had no way of grinding them up, other than by using her teeth to chew them into tiny pieces and then passing them from her own mouth into his. And this she did. She placed her pure, soft pink lips tightly over his. Jan-por thought nothing of it, but when she withdrew, she began to feel the gentle tenderness of the touch.

Jan-por pulled away from him immediately, even though she was overcome with a wave of emotion. Suddenly she realized that she had to save his life. She must save his life.

Jan-por quickened her pace, running as fast as she could. She must run to call her father at once, and beg him to go and pick up the man so that she could save his life by giving him food and shelter.

Jan-por wasted no time in stopping to rest but instead rushed home. Her father had been cutting rattan, tying it up and loading it onto his cart to take to sell in town. So quickly did Jan-por pull him away from what he was doing that she almost failed to notice that she had stood on a pile of orchid shoots which he had picked and had intended to sell in the shop he regularly supplied. In her haste the shoots were scattered all around.

Jan-por's father did not seem terribly concerned, pleased or saddened by her words, despite the fact that he was usually kind and gentle to her. Instead he muttered,

"It might be like going to the aid of a cobra that swings round to bite the hand that saved it."

"But he is a human being, father," she argued. "He too might have children that he has to care for, waiting for him back home, just like the animals that you always say you won't shoot."

Jan-por's father gave in to reason and agreed to follow her as she had asked, though going rather more slowly than she would have liked and than her heart dictated. It began to make her feel uneasy and she addressed the feeling by running on ahead of her father so that she could reach the man first, taking even less time than on her outward journey.

The entire way, until finally she caught sight of him lying there, breathing weakly, Jan-por had felt apprehensive of so many things. She had been afraid



that animals might pick up his scent and attack him, sharing him out between them for food. She had been afraid that ants would get into his wounds, causing him yet more pain. She had been afraid his condition would have worsened, and now he would be beyond help. She did not know why she felt so distraught and uneasy, but when she sank down onto her knees and held his head to her breast, she found her answer – that he meant more to her than her very own heart.

The serious expression on her father's face gave way to a smile when he saw how his daughter had tied the young man up. He said not another word, but simply grabbed the body with his sturdy arms and slung it across his shoulders. When they reached the hut and he had laid the man down on the makeshift bed, Jan-por set about untying him. But her father ordered to her to leave the man be. "He may not be a wild animal," her father roared, "but he is a town animal, and he is not to be trusted."

Jan-por sorrowfully looked her father in the eyes and reminded him how sick the man was. She did not want to see him being made to suffer any more than he had already or to be in too much pain, but her father's resolve would not be weakened.

"I have some medicine that they gave me in the town. They said it was modern medicine that acts quickly on malaria and stops it from getting worse. I'll fetch him some and then, when he's a little better, I'll stick him on my cart and take him away."

Jan-por walked dispiritedly away. Although she wanted to watch over the man in case he opened his eyes again, she feared her father's strict instructions. She sank down to her knees and lit a fire in the kitchen where she prepared some thin rice gruel and grilled dried deer meat. But her thoughts lay elsewhere. Once the gruel had cooled a little she lost no time in returning to feed the man her father had disparagingly called a "town animal" who was not to be trusted.

He must have had his eyes blearily open for some time, perhaps because of the medicine her father had given him, for he seemed calmer and had returned to his senses enough to have ceased rambling.

He looked at Jan-por in bewilderment and the first words he uttered were to ask her where he was.

She smiled a lovely, pure smile before answering him in a voice that was both soft and sweet:

"You are in my hut," and she tried to spoon some food into his mouth. The man managed to eat well through sheer hunger. She noticed that he was trying to free his hands and feet from being tied and he cried out so loud that her father ran in to see what was going on. The man, however, was soon out of strength and fell into a sleep that lasted two whole days.

Jan-por had furtively loosened the man's ties once her father had left the house with his gun, having heard the sound of a barking deer coming from somewhere close by. He was worried their food supplies were running low, but not so worried that he couldn't stop and turn round to Jan-por in order to give her some firm instructions: "You can look after him for a while, but when you give him food or medicine, or when he needs some water, don't get too close. He's just a man and you are a young woman. Believe me. I don't want to see you end up in tears."

In tears ... Why should she end up in tears? Was it because of what her father had just warned her, that she was no longer a little girl but a young woman now? But what had that to do with ending up in tears, when the man was neither a "town animal" nor a "cobra" that was going to swing round and bite her, as her father was afraid he would?

When the man re-awoke and was able to speak more coherently, she could not say why it was that she liked his eyes so much, most especially when they gazed down at her face and then moved still further down to peruse almost her entire body.

"You ... you ... you saved my life ... Tell me, please, are you a forest spirit?"

She was not in the least embarrassed by his question, for she believed it to be totally sincere.

"No, I'm human, just like you," she answered softly, and she listened to the story of how he had strayed and wandered in the forest until he had ended up by the stream where she had found him.

"They must be out searching for me now," he said, talking of the group of men that had been out hunting with.

"But I don't want them to find me just yet ..."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I don't want to leave this place."

"But there's nothing much here, apart from trees and hills and streams and flowers and lots of animals. Even I get bored here sometimes and I've wondered why my father will never take me to the town. I've asked him why not, but all he says is that the town is full of even greater dangers than the forest is ..."

"Your father's right ..." the man agreed, and he began to imagine his encounter with her like a scene from so many old novels he had read – a scene between an innocent young girl, born amidst the fragrance of nature and knowing nothing of love, and a young man coming to hunt for pleasure in the forest, meeting her and trampling all over her silly heart as though it were all a game.

"It's because you're so beautiful," he went on. "That is why your father does not want you to be harmed. He doesn't want to have to see you in tears."

In tears? Because of being harmed, because of being beautiful? This was all new to Jan-por, something she was now learning from him after her father had already told her on his way out ... But why was it that being a young woman and being beautiful would mean that she would be harmed and end up in tears?

"I don't understand," she said, shaking her head and showing her bewilderment.

"You must have seen wild flowers in the forest before," he said, comparing her to one of them. "They smell beautiful and their fragrance wafts far and wide, attracting insects to settle on them and indulge in sucking their nectar. But then, once the insect has had its fill of the pretty flower's sweet juices, away it flies, leaving the flower to simply wilt and fade away, while it goes on in search of sweeter smelling blossoms."

"But flowers don't cry."

"But you ...." he retorted.

"I've never cried since I was a child."

He observed her full lips. He looked at her eyes. They were like the eyes of a slight little doe. He looked at her throat, observing her so keenly that her heartbeat quickened pace. And then he asked her, "When? When will your father be back?"

"My father usually spends the night in the forest. But this time ... he'll be right back, since he said he was worried about me."

"You father must have a cart."

"Yes ... We use it for taking things to sell in the town, but the road is bad and winding. Why do you ask?"

"I want to pay him to take me back in his cart and get me back to town as quickly as possible."

"Uh? But you just said that you didn't want to leave. You said you wanted to stay. You said you liked it here. You must miss the town. Do you have children that you are worried about and want to get back to too, like my father?"

"I don't want to cause you any trouble," he said, avoiding the question. "And I don't want to see you in tears. For if I stay here a while and become close to you you'll miss me, won't you?"

"My father goes into town sometimes and leaves me here alone, but I have never cried."

"That's because you know he's coming back."

"So when you leave, you'll never come back again? There are lots of animals here and you like hunting so you could come here again with your friends and I'll get my father to take you to where there are lots of animals."

"You haven't told me your name," he said, hurriedly changing the subject.

"My name is Jan-por."

"Like the flower, *jan-ka-por*? That tiny, soft, yellow flower that smells so sweet?"

"No. My father says my name comes from the word *jan* for moon, but I don't know why it has the word *por* as well and I don't know what it means."

"It means that you are so beautiful that even the moon must bow down to you in adoration, because it is so envious of your beauty. Now do you understand?"

A rush of blood flushed her cheeks and her lips.

"Jan-por," he toyed with her name. And this time she could not look him back in the eye.

"Not only are you beautiful, but you have been so kind to me and I owe my life to you," he said as he moved to get up. But the wounds he had sustained from the thorns were still causing him severe pain and as he let out an anguished cry she rushed over to him and held him in her arms.

He was aroused by the smell of her shirt and of her young, pubescent body. Jan-por was so close to him that he could smell her fragrant breath, as sweet as the ears of a young rice plant. But he must not ... he must not become the cobra that swings round and bites the farmer that had saved his life, even though this forest girl was no farmer and was all sweet flesh and blood ... He would not let it turn out like it did in all the old novels he had been reminded of a little earlier. Although she was as beautiful as a forest spirit, and even more beautiful than the moon, so beautiful that even the moon was in awe of her and bowed down in praise of her beauty, even then he would not ... he would not make her unhappy and crush her tender heart.

"You'll never be able to stand the journey if you go on my father's cart, and in any case you don't need to pay him to take you. He already said that he was going to take you back. But ... but ... look ... your wounds still aren't healed and they're still bleeding too. Wait a little. I'll prepare some ointment for you."

He quietly endured the treatment and gritted his teeth with the stinging of the ointment, all the while feeling as though he were a dangerous animal tamed by her very compassion.

A moment later he pretended to fall asleep so that she would leave him be, admitting to himself that he was afraid of being too close to her.

He was afraid of everything, even his own heart. It was true that he may be able to fall in love with her, but ... in the end he would still have to leave her, for what else could he do when he wasn't without other attachments himself.

But still she stayed by his side and watched over him, no matter whether he was sleeping or awake, refusing to leave him, until she heard the sound of her father returning home. She rushed out to see him, leaving the man inside safe from temptation.



The smell of fresh meat drifted appetizingly in from the kitchen and soon it appeared next to him, along with some steaming white rice. Wild chillies and salt helped make it taste even more delicious. The man's wrists and ankles still felt numb as he tried to turn over onto his stomach to feed himself. She told him that the reason he had been tied up was to prevent him from thrashing around, which would have been bad for his fever. And he totally believed her explanation.

But to her father she invented a different excuse. "You told me not to get too close to him so I undid his ties so that I didn't have to spoon feed him with water and medicine."

"He's on the mend," her father said, as though he were talking to himself. "Tomorrow I'll be taking him back to town."

"But he'll be in a terrible state by the end of the journey," she objected, and her father looked at her, only to see that she appeared totally composed. "He is not strong like we are and he still has a temperature."

"There are plenty of good doctors around. I don't want to hear another word from you. Go and see to the meat and salt it before it goes off."

Jan-por turned sullen and angry, although she had never felt this way before. She was irritable and she did not feel like doing anything that her father had asked her. It was true she never cried, but this time she did, to ease the pain in her heart, especially now that she knew for certain that she was to be parted from him.

When Jan-por had finished her work she hurried to take a bath and wash her face so that she would be nice and clean. Carefully she combed out her hair and poured onto it the thick oil that her father had brought her from the town. And then she picked some flowers to put in her hair and dressed in the newest sarong she could find, before quietly tiptoeing in to clear away the dishes from the room where he lay sleeping.

The man was lying with his back to her so Jan-por stretched out her hand and tentatively touched his back, wanting to see whether she still had a fever. She was relieved to find that his skin was the same temperature as her own.

"Is that you, Jan-por?" he asked, slowly turning over. "I'm much better now. There's no need to worry about me."

"Then you'll be able to go with my father."

"Have you told him?"

"Yes, I have," she answered, lowering her head.

"Why is your voice trembling, Jan-por? What are you crying for?"

"I ... I ...", she spluttered through floods of tears.

"Come on, Jan-por. Wipe your eyes. I don't want to see any tears from you. It makes me feel, I don't know, it makes me feel bad."

"All right ..." and Jan-por did as he said, wiping her eyes on her shirt

sleeve like a child. "I won't let you see me crying again, because I don't want you to feel bad."

He took a chain from around his neck that had a Buddha amulet on it and placed it into her hand.

"This is for you. Put it on. The amulet will protect you and keep you happy and safe from danger."

"But ... you are going to leave me ... please don't leave me. You don't know, but when you were lying there unconscious at the edge of the stream, I chewed up some herbs and passed them from my mouth into yours. I ... I ... I have only just realized now that ... the reason I did it was because ..."

"Because you felt sorry for me and you were kind and compassionate," he interrupted her.

She fell against his shoulder and tried to hold back her tears but to no avail. He stroked her hair. It was sleek and shiny from the cheap, sweet-smelling oil, and he thanked it for helping to remind him of the differences that existed between them.

It was the middle of the night and the air had grown very cool. The sound of wild animals could be heard crying in the distance, warning him, as the smell of her hair had done, that he was right – he was a hunter and he should stick to hunting animals, not pretty girls and their tender hearts.

He hurried her to light the lamp and told her to fetch her father so they could arrange for him to be taken back to the town the next morning. Quietly, she did as he said and he knew all too well that she was crying as she did so.

But what of it! Let her cry away to her heart's content, for soon she would forget when she met a young man from the forest who would dedicate his life and soul to her. And even if that failed to happen, he did not want her to become like any old flower by the wayside. At least she should be like a forest rose that blossoms and fades in the fullness of time. For he accepted that he was like a bee from the town, one that was truly foolish.

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